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## THE CLASSICS AND MODERN LIFE<sup>1</sup>

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Ever since the Renaissance there have not been lacking able exponents of the view that the modern is superior to the ancient world; that the literature since the great revival of learning is superior to the literature of classical times, and that the duty of the modern world is to develop itself along modern lines without any great regard to the past. The supremacy of the modern world was ably proclaimed by Perrault in the reign of Louis XIV. The literature of this period, however original it may be, was based upon classic models; and the Battle of the Books, to quote the expression which Swift has made famous, has raged in England as well. That the question is still debated and considered debatable can only mean that the contest is undecided, and that the arguments advanced have been neither convincing nor exhausted.

Without attempting to enter upon this controversy, it is perhaps not improper for a layman to observe that even if the supremacy of the modern world in literature, in art, and in philosophy be admitted, the supremacy is the result of the achievement of the ancient world in literature, art, and philosophy, and that the modern world has reached its present degree of civilization and culture by a return to the traditions of the ancient world, interrupted by the ignorance and indifference of what we are pleased to term the Dark Ages; that the present is a development out of the past, which cannot be understood without a knowledge of the past, and that the civilization and culture of the present are therefore a growth rooted in Greece and Rome, not a condition developed by the immediate past or created by the conditions of the present day.

<sup>1</sup> From a Symposium on The Value of Humanistic, Particularly Classical, Studies as a Training for Men of Affairs, held at the annual meeting of the Classical Conference at Ann Arbor, Michigan, April 3, 1909. See *School Review*, June, 1909.

The question, however, is not one of supremacy either of the past or the present, but of the value to the present of the art, literature, and philosophy, the institutions and civilization of the ancient world. Indeed the question is still narrower, for an expression of opinion is not desired as to the theoretical importance of this knowledge, but as to the practical importance of the humanities to one actively engaged in the world's work. While it may be admitted that a public servant may perform the duties incumbent upon him without a knowledge of Greece and Rome, and with no very great familiarity with the institutions and problems of the ancient world, it is almost self-evident that the usefulness of a legislator, as distinguished from an administrator, would be enhanced by an adequate conception of the institutions of Greece and Rome as well as of the masterpieces of their political philosophy. Men change, governments rise and fall, nations pass out of existence, but the political relation of man to man, the problems of government, whereby individual liberty may be reconciled with the requirements of society, remain, and must be considered by each generation. The experience of the past, however remote, or of states, however small, cannot safely be overlooked by one who regards government and governmental theories as a development. Constitutions grow, they are not made; the Constitution of the United States was not created in the constitutional convention in 1787, but was the result of centuries of conflict and growth.

Again, it cannot be maintained for a moment that the artistic conceptions of Greece, and in a lesser degree of Rome, are of no advantage to the painter, the sculptor, the architect, and the critic. The mere statement amounts to a demonstration and we need only look about us to see the persistent, molding influence of Greece and Rome in all these departments of activity.

It may well be granted that the literature of the present day differs widely from the literature of the ancient world; that the conditions of the modern world demand a different treatment, and that various forms of literature have sprung into existence to meet the changed conditions. The standard of taste, how-

ever, has changed but little; the principles of composition are substantially the same; and it is not too much to assert that a masterpiece of modern literature would have commended itself to the critics of Greece and Rome just as the masterpieces of Greece and Rome not only commend themselves to the modern world but are models of thought and composition. It is not suggested that the *littérateur* of the present day must proceed along classical lines, and be minutely acquainted with the literature of antiquity, but it would seem to be beyond controversy that the average writer of the present day would have his thought refined, his taste purified, and his style chastened, by a thorough knowledge of the models and canons of the literary composition of Greece, and its imitator Rome. Genius is a law unto itself, and finds expression in any time and in any language; but the man of talent is strengthened by a knowledge of the past.

In the realm of philosophy the same is true. We cannot eliminate Greece, and in a much lesser degree Rome, if we would construct a system universally applicable. We cannot create a system without reference to the systems of the past which it has taken the past itself centuries to develop. These contentions may be readily admitted and yet it may be insisted that they apply to but limited classes; that they concern specialists in these various lines, and do not affect the overwhelming mass of our people engaged in the practical questions of the present day. However strong this objection may be, it is susceptible of an answer which amounts to refutation; for the study of these subjects, or of any of them, gives training and balance to the mind and we must perforce admit that the trained mind is essential to the proper conduct of affairs whether we be called upon to discuss problems of state, questions of literature, or canons of art and philosophy.

It is not asserted that training and balance may not be acquired by the study of the natural and physical sciences, or that an acquisition of modern languages will not supply linguistic training. It is maintained, however, that the study of classical literature, art, and philosophy supplies a training based upon models which have stood the test of time and which may therefore be considered universal; that the training derived from their study

is therefore correct training, and that we cannot, even if we would, omit these subjects in any curriculum which aims to fit a man for the problems with which he will be confronted in his daily life. It is not necessary to maintain the superiority of these studies; it is necessary, however, to assert their right to equality of treatment and that they be not discriminated against in our colleges and universities.

May I in conclusion illustrate and enforce the necessity at least of a comprehensive knowledge of Latin by calling to your attention the subject of international law, in which department I may perhaps speak as a specialist?

The student may, indeed, obtain a knowledge of international law as it exists at the present day from a careful reading of texts in English, supplemented by French and German treatises, but if he would trace international law to its beginnings and estimate rightly the force of public opinion, which not only controls our national policies but is shaping the international policies of the world, he must master the sources of international law; he must familiarize himself with the leading writers of international law who have in the past three centuries laid broad and deep the foundations of a stately structure, and he cannot do this without a thorough and practical knowledge of Latin. For not only did Grotius himself appeal to the public opinion in that language, with which public opinion was familiar, I mean Latin, but his predecessors and those who carried on the Grotian tradition and perfected the science of international law composed their treatises in Latin. The history of international law is a sealed book to one who is not a Latinist, and the ignorance of Latin argues at best but an acquaintance with secondary sources.